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Pattern as Memento – the Case of the 19th Century Dress Diary

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Introduction

(SLIDE)In January 2016 I was given a gift. Wrapped in brown paper and untouched since the 1960s, it had been purchased from a junk stall on Camden Market. At that time my friend Francine was the wardrobe mistress at the National Theatre and a young assistant bought this for her thinking it might be useful for her work but instead she packed it away, always intending to look at it more closely. It lay untouched until she gave it to me and I unwrapped a treasure. (SLIDE) It is a marble papered accounts ledger hand covered in bright pink silk and within are over 400 pages of carefully pasted fabric samples. Many of them are accompanied by a small caption indicating a date range from the late 1830s until the 1870s. (SLIDE) This paper represents my very early forays into the contents of this album, where it is situated amongst the largely female albumisation practices of the 19th century and what this kind of fragmentary material culture offers as a resource. It considers the patterns of collecting and organising, the patterns of fabric captured within and also the patterns of consumption that are beginning to be revealed by a whole community of women in the middle of the 19th century. It is a pattern of memento, of one's woman's life through her dress and the dress of those around her.

Albumisation Practices

(SLIDE) Albumisation practices were not an uncommon diversion for women in the 19th century, whether through the creation of scrapbooks or photocollages. Elizabeth Siegel emphasises: 'Victorian album makers unwittingly anticipated the modern era and issues that would later preoccupy the avant-garde; the infiltration of mechanically produced materials into art; the fluid mixing of diverse media; the convergence of multiple authors; and the creative act as a process of collecting and assembling rather than origination.'[1] There is no shortage of material evidence of this kind of creation in collections around the UK representing the lives of a whole spectrum of women in the Victorian period. However, less common are those dedicated to dress. (SLIDE) Textile sample books abound, pattern books created by textile and print manufacturers as records of their wares. Philip Sykas points out that: 'Although textile company archives have largely disappeared, many patterns books have been saved for the beauty of their contents. A survey of pattern books in North West museums, archives and libraries found thousands of volumes remaining.'[2] This volume, whilst sharing similarities with both the traditional domestic albums and the manufacturing pattern books, is something quite different and according to my research thus far, a rarer survivial. I call it a dress diary since it does bear resemblance to the rationale of a diary, it is chronological and records events, dates and people within its pages. (SLIDE) Perhaps the most famous of its kind is in the collections of the V&A and was kept by Barbara Johnson in the late 18th and early 19th century. Such was its importance that a facsimile of the entire album was published by the museum in the 1987. Barbara Johnson's album contains 121 samples of fabric, covering the years 1746- 1823 as well as pasted in fashion drawings,

prints, notes of fabric type and cost.[3] (SLIDE) To date I have discovered five other volumes that might be described in this way, all dating to the latter years of the 19th century and into the 20th, most of these in American museums. The V&A have no other resource of its type and I have yet to find others that are similar in Britain.

Who Is Inside?

The book has been created in a particular way and forms a specific pattern that is maintained largely throughout. (SLIDE) The pieces of fabric are cut into either rectangles or octagons of varying sizes and pasted into the book. Above the majority of each of the swatches is a caption that gives the name of the owner of the garment, the year, sometimes the month and occasionally some additional information relating to purchase, occasion of wear or type of garment. But to whom is this album attributed? At first glance there is no evidence of the creator of the album – no helpful inscription on the endpapers. No 'This Book Belongs To' and so my initial research concerned the transcribing of the captions within the book. (SLIDE) On folio 9, the owner was revealed. The name of Anne Sykes had appeared frequently but always recorded in the third person. A caption above a printed cotton noted: 'Anne Sykes May 1840. The first dress I wore in Singapore Nov 1840.'[4] This immediately located the author and unlocked the geographical position of the album as well. (SLIDE) One of the pages records the wedding garments with date of marriage of Anne Sykes and her husband Adam and parish records revealed that they married in Tyldesley in Lancashire on 20 September 1838. Adam was from Liverpool and Ann Burton lived on Factory Street in

Tyldesley. The groom's father James Sykes was described as a designer and the bride's father a spinner and manufacturer. Here immediately, then, are links both to the textile industry of Lancashire but also family connections in the trade, situating Anne firmly within a textile context.

What becomes very quickly apparent, however, is that this is not just a record of Anne's own dress practices but a whole community of her peers. (SLIDE) Principally women are the main contributors with more than 100 different names appearing in the album. Anne was clearly fascinated with the clothing choices of those around her and so the album appears to be a conscious collection of as many samples of textiles as she could gather from as broad a range as possible. She noted above a woven silk picture of Queen Victoria: 'Mr McMickering's contribution to this book given to him by one of the Gentlemen of the French Embassy to China.'[5] This indicates that she was asking those of her acquaintance to acquire material for the book, that she was interested in a plurality of content that went beyond her immediate circle of family and friends.

There is evidence of travel in the book, with a number of captions describing garments worn abroad or when travelling – Malta and Singapore seem to be the destinations most frequently mentioned. (SLIDE) There is also an interest in textiles from other cultural origins – a batik from Java, a colourful array or smaller silk samples with the caption: 'Syed Omar's dresses, all Arab silks.'[6] Chinese silks, Indian silks, swatches that are given their geographical and cultural label are all present in Anne Syke's collection.

(SLIDE) There are some celebrity entries in the volume, reminiscent of the later trend in autograph collecting except instead of the signature here are samples of clothing. Swatches relating to Royal dress have been sourced – from the Dowager Queen Adelaide, Vicky the Princess Royal and, in the most serendipitous of discoveries a loose piece of fabric discovered in the back of the book, a rectangle of orange damask with a label pinned to it that read: 'Dress worn by Queen Alexandra it was given me in 1912 by her dressmaker's sister.'[7] My doctoral research studied the surviving garments of Queen Alexandra and so this was coincidental indeed.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece of fabric is the most ordinary. (SLIDE) A piece of red flannel bears the caption: 'Part of the Pirate's flag taken in Borneo by the Admiral 1845.'[8] Early research has established that this relates to Admiral Sir Thomas Cochrane and he was indeed in Borneo aboard HMS Agincourt in 1845. In his despatches to the Admiralty, published in the London Gazette, he writes on August 26 of action taken against a local chief: 'I consider his influence to be entirely annihilated and his confederacy with various piratical chiefs in the Archipelago broken up'[9] Cochrane was an important figure in the Royal Navy and the presence of a piece of flag here is curious. At this stage it is unclear whether Anne sourced this through a third party or whether she had some connection to the Admiral himself. It serves to reinforce the conclusion that this is the book of a woman whose world view stretched well beyond her immediate locality.

The notion of provinciality, particularly in relation to dress, bears some interrogation. The patterns of consumption revealed in the fragments of garments serve to dispel some of the long held myths about fashion and the regions. The notion that fashion is a concept operating in urban spaces is surprisingly pervasive even now. Those living far from the metropolis have traditionally been labelled with the pejorative 'provincial' that came to mean more than simply living rurally. It indicated a supposed state of mind, a narrowness of outlook and a dis-association from notions of good taste and fashion. The fabrics caught within Anne Sykes's album, however, demonstrate just how fashionable these women are. (SLIDE) Looking at the fabric types alongside examples of surviving fashionable garments from the period, it becomes apparent that these women were well versed in changes of style. Their proximity to a renowned centre for textile production and possible links to that manufacture may, of course, account for this. More research is necessary to establish the boundaries of their knowledge, but there is evidence of many contemporarily cutting edge technologies – of sophisticated printing techniques and of new aniline dyes. The pattern of textiles themselves is dazzling from printed cottons to silks, wools to brocades, sheer gauzes to waxed upholstery cloth. Given the scope of both colour, pattern and fabric type there is a pattern here of personality. It is possible to identify particular names within the volume – Miss Goldie for example – who exhibit certain preferences in dress. The importance of dress in biography is an area of life writing and social history that is gaining momentum in the academy. Mida and Kim suggest: 'Dress artifacts are unique, embodying the haptic qualities of cloth, the aesthetic and structural qualities unique to fashion, the

traces of the person that used and wore the garment, as well as aspects related to its production and distribution.'[10] Fragmentary though these swatches are, a mere hint of the garment they were sourced from, their value is great in the reimagining of this community of women in mid-19th century Lancashire.

Conclusion

(SLIDE)To conclude, this paper represents the very beginning of a piece of research that starts, in a micro-historical sense, with a single volume compiled by one woman yet has far reaching implications. My intention is to undertake a genealogical study of those people identified within its pages and place them within the context of the textile industry in the North of England, patterns of dress consumption in the provinces, the vocabulary of fabric types and the importance of dress to those women who feature in Anne Syke's life. It encompasses mid-19th century album creation practices but in the specific context of dress alone. It indicates a relationship with fashionable dress that has often been denied these women living beyond an urban-centric fashion press. It is a visual diary of a Victorian community and they way they presented themselves to the world through their clothed bodies. In a sense it is a deconstructed quilt, the memorialising of life through cloth. Of 19th century quilts, Linda Parry writes: 'Quilts from the time illustrate all aspects of life, from the new age of technology and fashionable retailing to the enduring rituals of family life.'[11] In similar fashion, Anne Sykes's dress diary describes both family life and world events with its inclusion of a pirate flag from Borneo alongside Aunt Sykes's dressing gown. Its final pattern then, is that of

survival. The archives reveal that patterns of survival relating to this kind of object are rare. Whilst photograph albums or scrapbooks are more prolific, the dress diary appears to be an anomaly. Perhaps the perceived ephemerality of dress as a specifically female concern devalued it as an object of interest. It is to be hoped that as dress history continues to expand as a field, the centrality of dress to lived experiences can be re-evaluated and its importance celebrated. The dress diary has only just begun to reveal some of its histories locked within those octagonal scraps of cloth.

1 Elizabeth Siegel, *Playing with Pictures – The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, Yale University Press, 2010, p13.
2 Philip Sykas, *The Secret Life of Textiles*, Bolton Museums, 2005, p11.
3 Natalie Rothstein (ed), *Lady of Fashion – Barbara Johnson's Album of Styles and Fabrics*, V&A Publications, 1987, p29.
4 Dress diary, Folio 9
5 Dress diary, Folio 61.
6 Dress diary, Folio 46
7 Loose swatch of fabric found in the dress diary.
8 Dress diary, Folio 67
9 Henry Keppel, *The Expedition to Borneo of HMS Dido for the Suppression of Piracy*, Chapman & Hall, 1847, p294
10 Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim, *The Dress Detective*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p22
11 Linda Parry in Sue Pritchard (ed), *Quilts 1700-2010 – Hidden Histories, Untold Stories*, V&A Publications, 2010, p83.